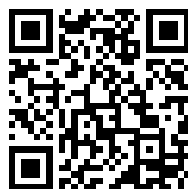

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The Date of Machiavelli's *Mandragola*

BY
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UNIVERSITY
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THE DATE OF MACHIAVELLI'S *MANDRAGOLA*

Evidence for establishing the date of composition of the *Mandragola* has been found in Act I, sc. 1, where the time and setting of the comedy are indicated, and in the verses of the prologue in which Machiavelli makes excuses for his choice of subject. Aside from Tiraboschi, who sets the date in 1498,¹ critics are divided into two camps. Those of one identify the date of composition with the date of action, 1504, and maintain that the prologue was written later, after Machiavelli's break with the Medici.² Another group holds that the prologue and comedy were written contemporaneously, after 1513, during the period when Machiavelli was forced into a life of inactivity.³ It seems strange, however, that they should have overlooked a reference to Machiavelli's comedy contained in his sonnet to Giuliano de' Medici.⁴ This sonnet is not

¹ *St. Lett. Ital.*, Venezia, 1824, VII, 5-7, 1752.

² Napoli-Signorelli, Polidori, Buchon, Borgognoni, Tortoli.

³ Medin, Artaud, Villari, Hillebrand, Gaspary, Tommasini, Sanesi, Osimo, De Benedetti.

⁴ Mazzoni & Casella, *Tutte le Opere Stor. e Lett. di N. M.*, Firenze, Barbera, 1929, 870-871.

dated, but, since Machiavelli was imprisoned only once (Nov. 1512-March 1513), there is no doubt as to the period during which it was written. In it, the Muse invoked by Machiavelli to intercede for him with Giuliano replies:

. . . Va al barlazzo
Con quella tua commedia in guazzeroni.

Machiavelli, begging Giuliano for clemency, reminds him that he is a poet and the author of a comedy which he mockingly qualifies "in guazzeroni."⁵ So we have it from M. himself that by 1512 he had written a comedy which was already known ("quella tua commedia"), if not to the public at large, at least to some of his intimates. The question now arises: which comedy, the *Mandragola*, the *Clizia* or the *Andria*? We can dismiss both the *Andria*, which was merely a translation from Terence's play of the same name, and the *Clizia*, an adaptation, and in some parts a translation, of the *Casina* of Plautus. The reference in the sonnet is made to impress Giuliano with the literary abilities of the writer (M.'s use of a poetic form would seem to confirm this) and to throw a light shadow over his political activities. Both the *Clizia* and the *Andria* lack the wit and originality of the *Mandragola* and added little to the lustre of Machiavelli's reputation. Furthermore, the *Clizia* must have been written much later than the *Mandragola*⁶ when the latter had become very popular, as is witnessed by the allusion to it in the third scene of the second act. Just as Machiavelli could refer in the *Clizia* to *Timoteo*, *Lucrezia*, and *Nicia* without fear of not being understood, so could he refer to "quella commedia" in the sonnet with the assurance that it would be immediately recalled. In further support of our argument, we refer the reader to the many references to *Messer Nicia*, *Fra Timoteo*, and "la commedia" found in the private correspondence of the Florentine secretary. These show that the *Mandragola* was Machiavelli's favorite and was not always referred to by name but

⁵ Cf. Petrocchi, s. v. *Guazzeroni*: "un brano qualunque." Tommaseo-Bellini, s. v. *guazzeroni*: "nelle marche è vestito che dal mezzo in giù due gheroni allargano, acciòchè il contadino cammini e lavori spedito." This meaning seems to apply here, that is, a "commedia da contadino" as opposed to the "comedia palliata" of the Greeks and the "commedia togata" of the Romans.

⁶ Tommasini, II, 414 n.; Villari, IV, 196.

as "la commedia." A glance at Papini's edition of the *Lettere di N. M.* will prove helpful: "questa comedia che ultimamente havete facta recitare" (II, 92); "... rispondervi dalla commedia" (II, 109); "... e avvisate a che porto è la commedia. . . ." (II, 107); "... cinque canzone nuove a proposito della commedia . . . et questo è quanto alla commedia" (II, 110); "... et ragionamo della commedia. . . ." (II, 105). When Della Palla writes to Machiavelli in 1520 regarding the performance of the *Mandragola*, he says simply: "... Inoltre ho parlato della vostra commedia." That he is referring to the *Mandragola* is clear because in the same letter he continues: "... A S. ta Maria in Portico feci la inbasciata del suo (that is, Bibbiena's) *Calandro* et vostro *Messer Nicia*." It is interesting to note that the play is never referred to in the correspondence as the *Mandragola* and this fact would make it seem that the prologue was not written contemporaneously with the play.⁷ If, therefore, the "commedia in guazzeroni" is the *Mandragola*, the sonnet to Giuliano acquires considerable significance and allows us to arrive at a closer approximation of the date of the composition of the comedy. While some critics place the date in 1504 and others after 1513 (but not later than 1520), we would say it was between 1504 and 1512.⁸

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⁷ The prologue was frequently used as a sort of "pezzo d'occasione." Castiglione wrote a special prologue for the *Calandria*; there are two prologues for *Le Pellegrine*; Poliziano wrote a prologue for the *Menecmi*; there are two prologues each for Ariosto's *Lena*, *Negromante*, *Scolastica*. Guicciardini (cf. Papini, *Lett. N. M.*, II, 109) asked Machiavelli to write another prologue for the performance of the *Mandragola* at Faenza. Had the comedy and prologue both been composed at the same time, it is very probable that the play would have immediately become known by the name *Mandragola*, mentioned in the prologue (*La favola Mandragola si chiama*).

⁸ The question is discussed at greater length in our Master's Essay, *Machiavelli's Mandragola*, Johns Hopkins, accepted in 1940.

